

Syrian government widens crackdown

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Bashar al-Assad's Ba'athist regime has deployed its armed forces to crush protests spreading from the small towns and villages around Dara'a and Baniyas, to the central cities of Homs and Hama.

The widening crackdown increasingly resembles a civil war. At least 18 people were killed yesterday, while hundreds have been detained in the last two days.

This war arises as workers and poor farmers who have suffered decades of repression face a dramatic deterioration of their living standards. Assad's market-based reforms and withdrawal of state subsidies have made it virtually impossible for millions of Syrians to make ends meet. Almost a third live on \$2 a day or less, due to rising food and fuel prices and there has been a sharp rise in unemployment, especially among the youth who constitute three-quarters of the jobless.

Unrest is also driven by anger at Assad's brutality in responding to the initial, more limited and localised unrest.

On Thursday, tanks and troops surrounded Hama, a city of 700,000 people and Syria's fourth largest, where up to 20,000 Muslim Brotherhood oppositionists were massacred by government forces in 1982.

On Wednesday, tanks shelled several residential districts in Homs, a city of 1.5 million people with most of the country's factories, one of its two oil refineries, and sugar refineries, killing at least five people. Another person reportedly was killed by a sniper in front of his own home, and 500 people were arrested on Tuesday night and Wednesday. Hundreds are said to be fleeing to Lebanon.

The army has taken control of the Bab Amr and al-Dubiyeh districts of the city and left the neighbourhood without water, electricity or access to medical care since Saturday. Tanks also shelled nearby Bedouin villages.

On Wednesday, state television said that the operations in Homs were over. Sana, the state news agency, said security forces had "arrested dozens of wanted men and seized large quantities of weapons and ammunition in Bab Amr". It claimed that one soldier was killed and four were

injured.

There were also reports that Syrian tanks entered the villages of al-Haraa, Inkhil and Tafas in the Hauran area, not far from the southern town of Dara'a that ignited the protests in mid-March. Thirteen people were killed, including at least one soldier.

Dara'a is still under army control, although the government says the situation there is now "normal" and that it would be withdrawing its tanks and soldiers from the town.

Since Saturday, troops have also been in action in the coastal city of Baniyas, mounting house-to-house raids in search of arms after six people were killed on Friday and Saturday. Troops seized weapons and detained hundreds over the weekend, including some close to the family of former Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam, now living in Paris. He has called for Assad's overthrow.

The regime claims that Khaddam, who is close to Lebanon's acting Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the Saudi regime, is working with the Islamists and has financed the armed uprising in Baniyas. It has described Baniyas as a hotbed of Islamist extremists out to stir up sectarian strife. State television broadcast confessions of a terrorist cell preparing to attack the oil pipeline, the railway and al-Qooz Bridge near the Tartous Highway.

There are many claims that automatic weapons are being smuggled into Syria from neighbouring Lebanon and financed by Riyadh and its local proxies. Most of the conflicts are close to Syria's borders with Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, where arms are easily available.

Some opposition activists have acknowledged that militant Islamists have a presence there. Other commentators insist that it is the government that is stirring up tensions between Sunnis, Shia and Alawites to prevent united opposition to the regime.

Turkey, one of Syria's allies in the region, allowed various Sunni religious groups opposed to the Assad regime to hold a conference last month. Exiled opposition members are now planning to gather regime opponents in Cairo this month, including activists from the Muslim

Brotherhood.

According to a spokesperson for the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 270 people have now been released after pledging to stop protesting.

Baton-wielding security forces broke up a demonstration of thousands of university students in Aleppo, demanding an end to the military siege of Homs, Baniyas and Dara'a. Police reportedly blocked off the university campus to keep the protest from growing and reaching the downtown area.

This was the first major demonstration in Aleppo, Syria's second largest city in the north of the country. The regime has sought to prevent the unrest spreading to the key urban areas of Damascus and Aleppo, which together account for half the total population.

In Muadamiya and other impoverished towns on the outskirts of Damascus, at least 360 people were reported to have been detained since last Friday.

There are conflicting reports of the numbers killed and detained since the uprising began. While Amnesty International says it has the names of 580 people killed, other groups claim that the figure is as high as 900. This includes a significant number of security and military personnel. The government has provided no overall figures and claims more than 120 of those killed are military and security services personnel.

The government has announced it was drafting a new law on general elections with promises that political parties and a freer press would be allowed. Assad adviser Bouthaina Shaaban met with Michel Kilo and other largely discredited oppositionists. Kilo, a leader of the Washington-backed Damascus Declaration group who has spent much of the last 10 years in jail, toned down his opposition to Assad and called for a "national dialogue".

Assad met a delegation of youths "who spoke of the violent practices of some security forces", while his prime minister, Adel Safar, announced a new scheme to provide employment for 10,000 university graduates a year in the public sector.

Syria is facing increasing pressure from the imperialist powers. As yet calls for regime change are not supported by the major powers, which fear that should Assad fall, Syria might descend into civil war and provoke a wider conflict.

In the US, an Obama administration official said, "We're not focused on a transition right now," adding: "We don't know who we'd talk to and who we'd work with."

Israel is still divided on the regime change in Syria, but Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has condemned the Western powers for not doing more to support the opposition in Syria as in Libya. "These inconsistencies send a damaging message to the people of the Middle East and further erode the path to peace, security and democracy for our region," he said.

His statements echo those of Defence Minister Ehud Barak, who last week said, "Assad is approaching the moment in which he will lose his authority... I don't think Israel should be alarmed by the possibility of Assad being replaced."

A sign of a hardening of Washington's line is the repeated claims that Iran is helping to suppress the opposition in Syria by providing personnel, materiel, security advisers, and IT and telecoms experts who can block social media web sites. President Obama first made the allegation on April 22, asserting that Assad was "seeking Iranian assistance in repressing Syria's citizens through the same brutal tactics that have been used by his Iranian allies."

US ambassador to Syria Robert Ford called on the Syrian government to stop supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon with weapons and other military equipment, much of it originating in Iran. Sanctions imposed on Syria by the US on April 29 also covered the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Cops Quds Force, which was accused of working with Syrian General Intelligence.

On Monday, the European Union officially confirmed that it would impose sanctions and travel bans on 13 key Syrian officials, but not Assad himself.

There are, however, increasingly strident calls for stronger action against Assad. Senators Joe Lieberman and John McCain unveiled a resolution condemning Syria's crackdown and human rights abuses and called for the Syrian government to be held accountable for its crimes under international law.



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